

House Sparrow



*“Whilst thousands in a flock for every gay
Loud chirping sparrow welcome on the day,
And from the mazes of the leafy thorn
Drop one by one upon the bending corn”*

From *“Farmer’s Boy”* (1799) by Suffolk-born poet Robert Bloomfield

Introduction

Never in our wildest dreams would we have imagined a day when protection measures would be advocated to save the humble house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) from local extinction. It now appears on the “Red List” of birds of conservation concern and is a Priority or Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species.

hedgerows, ivy-clad walls and trees, holes in trees, crevices and utilising the nests of house martins and swallows.



“It’s wonderful Rocky, another bird table”

House Sparrows have probably lived alongside humans since time immemorial and were our companions during the Stone Age. The name sparrow comes from the Anglo-Saxon *“spearwa”*. Until relatively recently, the house sparrow has been an abundant resident, nesting under roof tiles, in



When plentiful, house sparrows wove neat, domed-shaped nests made of mostly grasses, but occasionally decorated with pieces of string and cloth. Each nest was lined with feathers and hair. House sparrows are very sociable and bred together in colonies using nests constructed in blackthorn thickets. Several nests would abut each other forming a massive clump of hay and straw. In these situations, their chambers were accessed by a series of tunnels.

How to identify House Sparrows

The House Sparrow is a small, but sturdily built bird. They have a stout bill which is adapted for eating seeds.

Size and weight

Weight : around 34g

Wingspan : 24cm

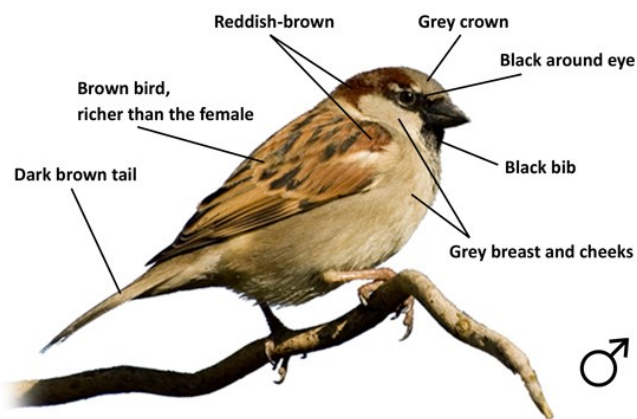
Length : 14cm

Food

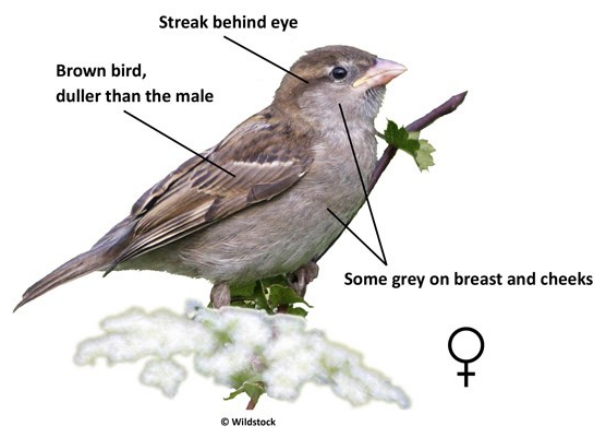
Although adults will feed on a wide range of seeds, they need to find plenty of aphids and small caterpillars for their growing youngsters, especially in the first few days after hatching.

Take a look at the pictures below to spot the differences between the males and females.

Male House Sparrow



Female House Sparrow and Young



The decline of House Sparrows

Up until the 1970s, every farm hosted colonies of house sparrows and the species was so plentiful that it was widely regarded as vermin. There have been few bird species that have been subject to such heavy and persistent persecution as the House Sparrow.

Before the 1970s it was an abundant resident in all our villages but most prolific during the few weeks before harvest in July/August. Thousands of adult birds and their young would desert the village and farm homesteads for the fields and live almost entirely from the ripening grain.

In the autumn, they would forage mainly around buildings taking grain from stacks and poultry yards. Farming techniques have changed so there is now little grain available to the birds.

It might seem shocking today, but back then it was a matter of people's livelihoods being at stake, so sparrows were destroyed at every opportunity.

A leaflet published by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries in 1903 states: "*While no one wishes to exterminate the sparrow, it is generally agreed that any good it may do in destroying harmful insects is so greatly outweighed by the damage done to crops that a reduction is as necessary as in the case for rats, or any other destructive pest*".

The presence of house sparrows in our towns and countryside was taken for granted in the past.

Although they were once present in such numbers that they caused extensive damage to the flowers and soft fruit of gardens, this is no longer the case. Since the 1970s we have lost the cheerful chattering of large groups of house sparrows nesting and feeding around our homes. When you consider the long association between house sparrows and human settlements, this is a sad cultural change as well as affecting complex food chains.

What's caused the decline in House Sparrow numbers?

- ◆ Not enough insects for the chicks.
- ◆ Not enough food for the adults.
- ◆ Predation i.e. being killed by domestic cats.

Sparrow pie

Up to the 1950s, sparrows were regularly taken for the pot and sparrow pie or pudding was a common dish. Sparrow pots were fixed specifically to attract nesting sparrows and naked nestlings harvested at the appropriate time. Eggs were taken for omelettes and birds captured for the meat. Possibly the last sparrow pie consumed in Britain was one containing 100 sparrows, which was served as late as 16th January 1967 at the Rose Inn at Peldon, near Colchester.



Protection for the House Sparrow

The views on these draconian measures changed in the 1970s and today the House Sparrow is a species of Conservation Concern. It is listed as a Priority Species because of the dramatic decline in population numbers and appears on the Suffolk Biodiversity Action Plan (see www.suffolkbiodiversity.org/biodiversity-action-plans.aspx#species). The UK population has dropped by nearly three quarters since 1977.

How can we help?

- ◆ Provide food all year round (e.g. sunflower seeds/hearts and millet).
- ◆ Provide mealworms in the spring and summer.
- ◆ Leave a small 'weedy' patch in the garden. Sparrows will eat the seeds of annual plants such as chickweed and plantains and insects will find shelter.
- ◆ Leave a section of lawn to grow longer. The long grass will shelter insects and provide seeds.
- ◆ Avoid the use of chemicals such as lawn treatments that may kill insects reducing food availability.
- ◆ Build the sparrows a home. House sparrows will nest in creepers such as ivy, but they prefer holes in buildings in particular behind fascias and soffits of roofs. If these are replaced, retain an access hole for sparrows. They will nest in boxes and as colonial nesters favour special terrace nest boxes. Boxes with single entrances are unlikely to attract a breeding pair.
- ◆ Provide shelter such as thick dense shrubs and climbers.
- ◆ Provide bird baths.

Make a terrace nest box

The terrace nest box can be made using the plan shown in Fig. 1. Fasten it securely below the eaves of your school or house. It should be at least 3 metres above ground level. The box should face in an easterly direction avoiding direct heat from the sun and the prevailing wind and rain.

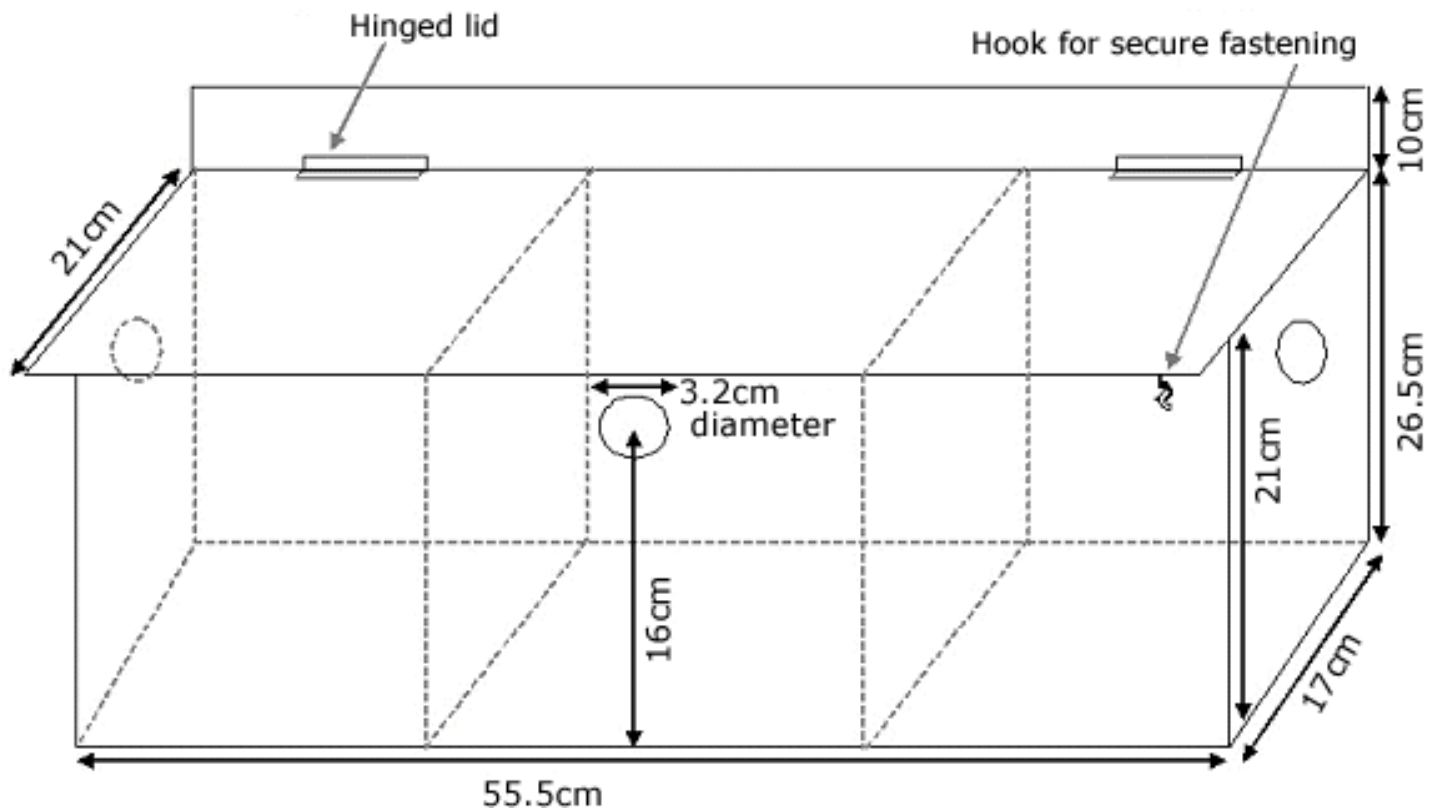


Fig. 1 The design of a colony House Sparrow box

How the project started

In 2013, Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership, Waveney Bird Club, HMP Hollesley Bay and Cofely Technical Services collaborated to erect house sparrow boxes at Leiston Primary School.

This was in celebration of World House Sparrow Day on 20th March and the school's link with Maharani Gayatri Devi Girl's School in Jaipur, which also has a House Sparrow project. There is a large conservation movement in India for the species.

We are now aiming to involve more schools in the East Suffolk House Sparrow Project.

Where to find further information

- ◆ See a video of house sparrows on the RSPB website – www.rspb.org.uk
- ◆ Find out about house sparrow research on the British Trust for Ornithology website www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw/about/background/projects/sparrows
- ◆ Hear the house sparrow song on the British Garden Birds website at www.garden-birds.co.uk/birds/housesparrow.htm

*Thank you for caring
about these very special
little birds!*



*With grateful thanks to Steve Piotrowski for the text
and
Paul Read for the cartoons*

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